

# Good Intentions

By Anonymous VFA-94 Maintainer

We recently had returned home from an extended eight-month combat deployment to the Arabian Gulf in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. With the dangers of life at sea behind us, the squadron was rewarded with a generous stand-down period, so we could reunite and spend time with our families. Everyone was tremendously proud of a job well done and a mission accomplished successfully. It would dull quickly.

Now that we were on our home turf with no imminent threat of danger on our radars, we could afford to loosen up a bit on the maintenance push. We just had finished a combat cruise, flown thousands of hours, and dropped lots of bombs. We were at the top of our game, so we had no reason to be concerned. Right?

We started two-shift maintenance and began to get back into the routine of operating at our home base in California's San Joaquin Valley. The priorities handed out during the morning maintenance meetings made sure enough aircraft were available for the flight schedule, no matter what it took or how full the plate. "Just give me another helping of tasks," I thought, "and I will find a way to get it done, all with good intentions."

The squadron was preparing for the upcoming material-condition inspection and maintenance program assist (MCI/MPA) inspection. With a team at the top of their game, this inspection should be a breeze. At least, that's what I thought.

I worked my programs, ran the work center, knocked out all the evaluations, found time to train all these

After-cruise flight and maintenance schedules usually are relaxed.



# Gone Bad



A connecting link failure on landing was the first sign of trouble.

Yes, my plate was full, but I thought I could handle it. I didn't want to let down the chiefs. QA was in my shop daily to see how we were coming along for the inspection. I didn't want to admit it, but we all were getting further and further behind. I was up late at home working on evaluations and other admin stuff that I couldn't get done during the day. I had good intentions of getting it all done, no matter how much time it took.

Then things started going from bad to worse. We had completed

green wrench turners, and was ready to do CDI inspections on multiple jobs—oh yeah, and gave regular updates to maintenance control. If there was another priority, I'd get it done. I wouldn't disappoint maintenance control or my division.

During this time, we got word about a possible prepare-to-deploy order (PTDO), meaning we had to be ready to go in 96 hours should it be issued. We had to cover a couple of legacy Hornet squadrons transitioning to Super Hornets—just another thing to add to the list.

As the PTDO squadron, our level of readiness needed to be at the same level as the other squadrons in the CAG. Our flight schedule increased dramatically, as did our workload. Of course, the more we fly...the more they break. This is a cause and effect that we all accept, and it is the price of doing business in naval aviation.

The workload kept growing, and I found myself drowning ever so slowly, trying to get these aircraft up and knock out everything else. Before I knew it, my days started getting longer and longer, and I tried to keep up.

a phase inspection on one of our jets, and, during the post phase flight, the aircraft had had a connecting-link failure on landing. The pilot declared an emergency and circled the airfield. He eventually made a field arrestment at the end of the runway. The pilot was OK, and we could fix the aircraft without much difficulty.

My crew gathered the necessary tools and parts and went to work replacing the bent connecting link. I had the publication on the job, but, since I had done this procedure many times before, I was certain the book



Replacing a bent link is a relatively easy job to do, when the MIMs are followed.

Checking the rigging of the landing gear is a critical step, also addressed in the MIMs.

wouldn't tell me anything I already didn't know. During this job, a few work center questions arose, distracting me from the task at hand. I broke away from the job to answer the questions in the shop. In my absence, nobody read the pub—primarily because I was a poor example and did not read it myself.

We also had another aircraft in phase, and the crew on that jet had some questions regarding the work they were doing. So, I climbed on top of the aircraft to address their questions. Maintenance control was calling me to go out to the flight line and troubleshoot a hydraulic leak on an aircraft trying to launch. While troubleshooting that aircraft, we discovered the problem was more than a loose line; it was another failed component. At this point in the day, it was almost time for shift change, and I remembered maintenance wanted the aircraft with the connecting link off jacks before night check arrived for work.

I went back to the hangar exhausted and didn't recognize the indicators of being overwhelmed and overtired. I told maintenance control the flight-line aircraft was down because of an excessive leak from the hydraulic drive unit. After a while, I was able to get back to the aircraft on jacks, and I noticed that night check was arriving. The crew had the connecting link replaced and ready for operational checks. I knew one of the maintainers had done this job before, and I rushed right into the operational check without checking and verifying the rigging of the landing gear. The aircraft drop-checked fine for the CDI and QA, so it was lowered to the deck.

The next day, that same aircraft with the bad connecting link had another issue with landing gear while landing. This time, our maintenance officer was flying the jet. Maintenance control told me about the situation and asked if I could offer any advice to help the pilot. After troubleshooting and declaring an emergency, he made a field arrestment at the end of the runway.



Both of these landing-gear incidents easily could have ended in a major mishap. After the aircraft was towed back to our flight line, I went out to inspect the damage. The planning link was bent severely because of an incorrectly rigged connecting link. I went over the steps in my head, trying to figure out how this problem could have happened. While going back over the steps of the maintenance evolution and how we did the work, I was sick because I had not used the publication on this job. I just was trying to get the jet up. My intentions had been good, but my maintenance practices and leadership was poor. Maintenance malpractice was a term at the forefront of my mind. Yes, I felt overwhelmed and tired, but I had lost sight of good judgment. We cannot be combat ready if we don't get it right the first time.

No one was hurt, and the aircraft wasn't damaged severely, but it could have been different. I have learned that luck has no place in the maintenance business. Doing by-the-book maintenance is the only way to minimize risk.

I also learned a valuable lesson about identifying the signs of task saturation and using other resources, like CDIs from other work centers who are qualified to inspect your work. QA also could and should be used. It is important to talk with your division chief and the maintenance chief about resolving or resetting priorities. Good leaders know when to cry "uncle," and good intentions are no excuse for poor results. ✈